

DIARY

JULY

As I have no other book this English one, from the aerodrome at El Adem, must do. I've torn out some used pages, so it's quite serviceable. The latest news is not the war in Russia, but that two men from the Battalion can go on leave every fortnight. I've worked it out that under this scheme we shall need five-and-a-half-years. Marvellous, isn't it? But I don't want leave that lasts only 21 days starting from Naples.

The food here is now perfectly bloody. Today I had a little bit of cheese that provided just three thinly spread slices. I'd like to see the blurbs they're shoving in all the newspapers about our "splendid" grub out here. Here we sit like birds in the wilderness, so they give us food fit for owls. It's right enough to say that the German soldier adapts himself to his environment. Like a fool, I'd always wondered what the scorpions lived on. What do we live on, anyway? Let's hope that at home they don't forget us altogether on account of the Eastern campaign. I do not want to start a mutiny here, but there is no doubt that they could do better for us. It seems we shall be staying here for quite some time, as the leave business leads one to infer.

No break again for Sunday. I've got to work so that the paper-war may flourish. Three loud cheers for the paper-war. We started off the day again with an inoculation in the left breast, this time against cholera. If it goes on like this we shall shortly be walking medicine chests. A deplorable thing occurred yesterday. One of our men had a wallet stolen from his tent - it contained 1500 lire (= 195 Rmarks). Unfortunately we couldn't catch the thief. But you find such people everywhere, who can't keep their fingers off things. Every evening you can hear it thundering away over Tobruk. Our airmen are on the job all the time. Then the next evening Deutschlandsender tells us what is going on in Africa. Yesterday I sent a large poisonous spider away to the VOLKLING-High School. I should think it'll be still alive when it arrives, for these creatures can go hungry for weeks. I hope they like it.

One platoon has got to be in readiness as a support platoon. The section vehicles are all away bringing up supplies so we've got nothing for ourselves here but my lorry and that of the armourer N.C.O. etc. These we unload and set aside for this purpose. We've got no more fuel either. I think that if the British had a go at us now they could walk all over us. We are helpless here with no M.T.

It's dark already. Over there on the slope an Arab is piping away on his nerve-shattering instrument like a child of four.

Today I lay the whole day in bed, feverish and trembling in every limb. I ate nothing all day but two bits of bread and marmalade. Has the tropical sickness got me as well? In a few days, they say, we're moving forward to the Sollum front. I've got nothing against it. The chief thing for me is to keep well. I don't want to see any medical orderlies; they don't know themselves what they're doing.

I've reached the stage that almost the whole company reached months ago. All pride in my health has gone. If this lasts another three weeks I'll be a useless wreck. But in spite of everything I'll grit my teeth and go through with it, and not leave Africa before my unit leaves it.

Last night things were pretty hot in Tobruk. Half the night German bombs were crashing down. Enormous pillars of fire rose in the air. I admire the iron resolution with which the British fight on from this isolated post. It was in their power to abandon it by sea long ago. For our part, since the first attempt at a break through no further attack has been successful, in spite of heavy losses. Around Tobruk a 40 kilometre by-pass has been built through the desert.

I ate no more today than I did yesterday. Even my favourite dish, haricot beans well-cooked, couldn't tempt my appetite. My gorge rises at everything.

/AUGUST

AUGUST

We get it pretty bad with British planes here. The beggars are here the whole time. If the minefields which we're laying here in conjunction with the Italians are anything to go by we needn't think of carrying on with the war till next January or February. The whole business is slowly getting just a little too boring and stupid. If I get too angry with it all I'll apply for leave. Just six months ago (i.e. 27 Feb., '41) I first stepped on African soil. Time flies.

Over Bardia one flare after the other is dropped. Now 4 of them are hanging there - and now the Tommies have laid their eggs. Of our Luftwaffe there's nothing to be seen. I think they must be away in Russia. Well, boys, just wait a moment; when they're here again and a big air attack begins, then the old desert will heave with a vengeance. Italians are working here as well; they're laying their mines in front of ours. In the short time that we've been here 3 Italians have already gone up in the air while doing their job. God knows what they think they're at. We've laid some thousands without that happening.

The Italians are gradually getting on my nerves. The whole live-long day these friends of ours sound the air raid alert - whether for a German or an Italian or a Britisher, they don't care a damn. Then they take to their heels and dive down their holes. When the All Clear sounds they first of all poke their heads out cautiously, and then creep forth. We don't let this comedy disturb us.

SEPTEMBER

(At a strong point south-east of Capuzzo).

In some circles there's some talk of the prospective storming of Tobruk; this is due to take place on the 15th of this month. It would certainly be fine if this plague-spot of Cyrenaica could be wiped off the map. I think we've already made ourselves a bit ridiculous before the British in Tobruk. But the fact is that we can't spare many people. There may well be some losses, for when we veteran Africans are away the D.A.K. is as good as broken up. A little bird tells us that away deep down in the Sahara, in the oasis of Kufra, a few English wise guys are squatting, about 200 kilometres south of us. West of the Siwa Oasis (in Egypt) there are also some on Italian soil in the Oasis of Jarabub. We don't bother about them; they might as well not be there at all. If we advance they will be cut off from their lines of supply, and they will have to find their own way out. An attack by them on our flank is hardly possible, for while they're stationary in the oases their supply problem is serious enough, and they've got nothing available for an advance. Here you've got to have water, petrol, food and munitions if you want to carry on a war. Without them, hopeless. In other theatres of war you only need munitions to carry on the fight. But not here!

Not much to record for today. All day long we had our hands full with T-mines, H.E.s., shells, detonators, time fuses, and such like. In the evening I bathed both my feet in soapy water, for four scratches had festered and they've been open for fourteen days. At least 20 men are running around in this condition; everything festers and refuses to heal. After I had bathed them the medical corporal came and removed the septic matter with his surgical pincers. Today a man is off to Catania in Sicily; he has jaundice. What a life! Another man has diphtheria. One has this and the other has that. 15 of us have stomach trouble. The health situation is ghastly.

/It's so

It's so sad I feel like biting my big toe for laughter. Our minefields extend down to Sidi Omar. In order to afford free passage towards the enemy gaps have been left in them. But last night Tommy packed one of these gaps with his own mines, and early this morning one of our armoured recon cars drove over one of them. War-time humour. The serious side is that this can only be due to treachery on the part of the The English certainly can't tell where a gap is by the smell. He can't see it, either. Just too bad. The same thing happened in Bardia Harbour. As soon as the 6000-ton (sic) supply-carrying U-boat came in, the Tommies bombarded the harbour. It's a murderous disgrace. Today I tested 77 T-mines and found the fuses not in order. In the case of 30 I had to put in new fuses.

The new Commander has forbidden the wearing of short trousers. So now you run about the whole day in long trousers and sweat like a pig. I don't know which is worse; the Commander, the flies or the rats. To hell with it! Are we in Africa or the Arctic or a madhouse. Everyone wants to go home. They say, quite rightly, "What are we doing here still? We're not fighting." Only with a sense of humour is this bearable.

I spoke this morning with an Italian 1/3 by speech, 2/3 by gestures. He told me the English would never attack Rome. It was too ancient, the Holy Father lived there, and Rome had on that account no A.A. I made it plausible to him that we might shortly be getting a move on, in order to reach Cairo. He showed precious little elation at the prospect. That these fellows have no longer any stomach for the fight is absolutely clear to me. Some of them have been here for 20 months, and have had no leave. Perhaps these figures will apply to us some day. God forbid!

(He is talking to 2/Lt. Biedermann) He says that to-night our Division is to make an attack, which is due to reach Sidi Barani. The main body of the Division is to consist of empty lorries which we're going to fill over at Tommy's. The chief idea is to get hold of spare parts for the British M.T. that we're running, also food and such stuff, of which Tommy has got more than we have. There should be food camps at the A, B and C stages, and a Mark II workshop whose spare parts are needed for the tanks we've taken over. As soon as everything is loaded on and carried off the Division is returning to its old position. Our company has the ludicrous job of guiding the Division through the minefields on the outward and on the return journeys. It's maddening - we poor stooges sit here, see nothing, hear nothing, have no experiences. The whole boring war can just go hang as far as I'm concerned. Devil take the whole of Africa, with its palm trees -- all the three of them, and we're due to lounge around like this for another nine months still. I'll go crazy. According to a secret order all men of the '13 class and older are to be sent back. I'd like to go raging over to Tommy's lines with a pistol and shoot up everything that came in my way. But I'd soon be for the high jump.

I don't like all the recon activity that Tommy has been carrying out yesterday and today. I think he's smelt a rat. The whole long day British fighters are over us, not giving that for the feeble Italian flak. If we're here for another nine months things will get interesting. Our British brothers will probably land up here in order to fill up their tanks from our petrol. I think the old Lettow-Vorbeck war must have been more interesting. What are we waiting for anyway? Till the British come over in divisions and say: "Well, Germans, you fought darn well! We're sick of eating corned beef, potatoes, peas, beans, meat, milk, whisky, mineral water and soda water. Here are our weapons, give us some dry Army bread for 'em." "All right". It makes you sick. Every day we're getting thinner, but that's no reason for going back home. Only if you've got no left arm and no right leg can you start talking of "home". I don't want to go off on leave, just in order to return to Africa, but am I a jail bird that after 7 months in Africa i'm given no opportunity to see home again? What enemy artillery, the R.A.F. etc. don't succeed in doing the climate will certainly finish off. Can a system that for over a year has been nourished on tinned foods have the strength afterwards to stand up to the raw German climate?

/Today

Today that mad Italian bugler sounded the air raid alert no less than 18 times. That makes 36 bugle calls altogether. The Italians are by this time getting to be a real joke. They shoot at anything in the air - providing it is far enough away. Today two fighters came over. I stood in my M.G. position and looked at them through the binoculars. I at once recognised them as Germans, and M.E. 109s at that. Just then an Italian A.A. gun nearby opens up and plants about the Messerschmitt's noses a better directed fire than any I've seen from them yet. They were quiet for a moment, and I yelled across in Italian, "Stop! They're German!" One of them shouted back that they hadn't got any glasses. "You're a fine lot, you are," I shouted. If I'd been a fighter pilot I'd have attacked the gun and shot them up.

Last night our Division came back and was guided by our Company through the minefields. As I had anticipated, the undertaking had been a failure. Tommy had packed up and gone back. The first rations dump had been evacuated; the second blown up. Two British recon patrols were captured. Some of our fellows were killed by British air attacks. As the Division started its withdrawal, it had difficulty in shaking off the British, who immediately closed in on it. The two forces made contact. The enemy didn't know that we had planned to fall back, and read into it a weakness which he's probably now counting as a victory and blaring forth to the world.

At lunch-time 8 British bombers flew over in close formation as calmly as you like. I'll have to get hold of a British A.A. gun. It's getting a bit thick that our friends are invariably permitted to go on their way undisturbed. Of course, the Italian flak hasn't fired a shot, for the bomber is the sort of thing that might, just conceivably, drop a bomb. They must see it's useless to try to placate the things by not shooting, for you can get a bomb in your eye ever so easily and then you've got to wear a glass-eye or a black patch for the rest of your life.

Is it a tragedy or a comedy that's being played here?

OCTOBER

(West of Bardia).

Since the boat left Bardia harbour we've had some peace in the air.

(For the first part of October the writer is seriously ill. He has pains in the left thigh that crippled him. But throughout, as he records, he works indefatigably - and grouches half hysterically, as usual.)

The night was all right, considering the circumstances. About 10 o'clock the Tommies again started bombing Bardia. In the daytime I had no pain, provided I lay still. According to a new rumour that is going round, the 1913 class and those older are not going home after all. It's a damn nuisance; I was hoping to send Ann some parcels by them.

Instead of treatment all I get is "hospital". Every second word - "hospital". In the devil's name, am I in an asylum? Did I volunteer for Africa of my own free will just to have my left leg slowly rot away through neglect? The papers are still blabbing away till the cows come home about what care and attention we get here. Just flinging sand in the eyes of our people at home. Better for them certainly not to know anything of what's going on here. The food in the last few days has been wretched. And what have we got to add to that? Another half year at the very least to stick here.

Today Leut. Knoerzer went off to hospital. Everyone was glad - from the youngest soldier to the oldest lieutenant.

/Today

Today, once again, we got rations for three days. I had such a pitiable hunger that I've already eaten my rations for tomorrow and the day after. That I'll eat then God alone knows. Perhaps I'll get another parcel. Isn't it perfect mockery what they offer us here for food? Here, of all places, where you need more to keep your health than elsewhere. It doesn't matter a damn if we go to the dogs; what matters is that Germany saves foreign exchange and will win the war. What happens to us makes no odds here or there, for the Afrika Korps has grown a lot. A few months ago not a man could be spared, but to-day - ! They want us to build a wooden cross out of an old box.

Thank God one more month is over. One month less of this boring existence. Here you begin to feel so out of the picture and superfluous. No enterprise is planned. The company digs itself into holes, and disappears from the surface of the earth. It exercises, finds assault detachments and does night manoeuvres.

I think I forgot to mention that our Chief Lieutenant Knoerzer went back to Germany last Tuesday. Before he went he gave us a talk and explained that a man was a traitor if he wangled his way out of Africa by low scheming. He himself had to go back home for reasons of health. Poor dear Knoerzer; we do so pity you. You're just as healthy as any of us.

NOVEMBER

(The Sergeant is ill again, this time with a slight fever).

It's like this here. If you go down with anything, as for example I did with my leg, it's just one damn thing after another. A small wound on the fore finger of my left hand has already grown to a big septic wound as big as a penny piece. No ointment's any good. You can't get any soapy water to bathe it in; the water just won't take the soap. The water here is all filth.

Tonight Tommy was here again. He was by no means in a hurry; just circled round in a quite leisurely way. He dropped 4 flares. Our camp was as clear as day. The bombs fell in the desert. God knows what he saw there to annoy him.

Shall I curse or shall I laugh? Shall I kick things around? I'll keep my mouth shut; that's the best thing. On a Sunday they actually give us a ~~1/2~~-of-a-plate of food. But be content, you've got all you need! What? Not the case? It's there in the papers; you'll find it in the weekly illustrated. Then it must be true. Now I have really got fed up with the whole show. Nothing doing in front of us or behind; in addition to which you've got to starve and every night we have a visit from the Royal Air Force. I'm going to apply for leave - basta. They can stay in their own juice. I want to go home. When I get back let's hope we get a move on. We can live on dry bread for all I care, so long as we get a move on. When we were shifting about all over the desert like Arabs we were always told, "Of course, supplies can't follow you; you move so quickly. But it'll soon be better; we've everything stored in Tripoli." Now we've been stationary for weeks, and suddenly they have the cheek to tell us, "Yes, the English are sinking too much of our stuff." Nothing's simpler than that - you just work out the average quota of losses, send over enough extra to right the balance, and there you are. The thanks of the Fatherland go out to you, boys, sure enough. You see it more clearly every day. Divisional Orders say that numerous bags of parcels have been lost through enemy action. This should be made known to our parents; it would save unnecessary questions afterwards. About 10 parcels of mine must have gone to the devil. How do you like that? They're not even in a position to safeguard the little needs and luxuries that we get from home. Everything sums up to this: "We're holding out in a lost post." Now I'm going to put an end to it, and put in my application for leave.

/C.S.M.

C.S.M. Gasenzer was pretty close to a nervous breakdown and has gone off somewhere to recuperate. So it's gradually getting us down, one after the other.

Yesterday we were again given three days' rations. It's simply incredible what we've got to put up with. Poor homeland, can you offer nothing better to your sons who are roasting in Africa's heat?

Last night Tommy came on the scene again. Our reconnaissance unit came to blows with British armoured recce vehicles. We've been told to be ready for action. When I came back from a visit to the Inspector I had no need of a torch, for the sky was full of flares. Nearby bombs were falling, and fragments hissing through the air.

At half past seven I'd just got up when two British fighters came zooming down on us, so low that they just grazed the tent-roof. I just managed to fire a burst from my English M.G. after them. Our twin M.G. rattled away too, but the beggars were off. In the course of today so many lorries have been sent to me here for repair that at the moment I honestly don't know how many there are. My head's spinning. About 17.00 hours the Inspector had a trial alert, which held up the whole show. At Sidi Omar our division is in contact with the enemy, and I, like a poor devil, have got to sit here and let Tommy take pot-shots at me. Choose any job you like, only not that of Schirmmeister. To hell with it.

Towards 9 o'clock a D.R. came from the Bn. with a message instructing me to report immediately to the Inspector. I went off on the mo' bike, and saw the Inspector observing with his glass the small ridge of high ground which extended away to the south of us (its name is the Hagag Kebrit Anwar, but we call it Gebel for short). "Just take a look at that." I was not in the least surprised to see that the whole ridge which starts at Halfaya and goes off towards Tobruk was occupied by British M.T., for there was a good chance of this from the start. I was ordered to give the alarm in my camp and then rejoin H.Q. Sweating blood, we got two lorries that were there for repairs into running order, also a car and a motor-bike. All single tents and larger tents, etc., are still standing. All I've taken away is Ann's picture and the cigarettes. When it was dark the Afrika Divisional H.Q. which is still in Bardia, ordered us to withdraw immediately inside the ring of forts. An order came that an N.C.O. and ten men, with one machine-gun, were to go out as a recce patrol at dawn the following morning and see how the land lay. I asked to be given this job. Once outside the defence ring I spent the night sitting in the Volkswagen, and shivering with cold. From every direction artillery thundered. Where is the front? Everywhere. In the desert everyone's tangled up in hopeless confusion. The front is wherever two enemy formations meet.

This morning at 8 I was just in the act of leaving the iron ring with 20 men, a lorry and a car, when Tommy started planting some pretty decent artillery fire just in front of the exit. I ordered the lorry and the men back, for I couldn't answer for our getting through. I stayed there myself, to keep an eye on events, and went over to an Italian A.A. emplacement. The Italian lieutenant greeted me in a very friendly way. About half an hour later the telephone bell rang, and a German officer was asked for. As there wasn't one there I went myself. "This is Capt. Ruhr, of the Afrika Division." "Yes, sir." "Six kilometres west of the machine-gun emplacement of the fortress perimeter, towards Tobruk, there's one officer and three men, including a wounded man, on the Via Balbia. Please send out a patrol and try and get them back." "We're under harassing fire, sir", I said. "We can't get out. Besides, Tommy's running about all over the show." "Look here, we've got to make an effort. Let me know what happens." "Very well, sir." I decided to tackle the job personally, got hold of my PKW and drove myself. At the Bn. camp I met the Inspector and a few men with the 8-cylinder car. I put the case before him and asked for the use of the car, which is much faster, for we had to reckon with the possibility of pursuit by the British. The Inspector, the medical W.O. (Unterartz), Dr. Fanslow, Sgt. Meyer and myself drove off. First we followed the Wadi to the north, and then turned off west and later south-west. We came on the abandoned camp of the Panzer-Jäger Regiment. Here also all tents were still standing, and a lot of stuff was lying around. Among it a heavy motor-bike. I mounted the bike. It functioned all right; the engine was soon running. I tore off ahead, as fast as the stone desert permitted. I went over a bump and almost lost my sight and hearing. Just in front was an English lorry with three men. "Get 'em, boy!" I thought. Half the time the

wheels were in the air. A cloud of dust rose and he disappeared with his four wheels and eight cylinders before my two wheels and two cylinders. The hilly country has swallowed him up; he's away to the west. I look back; the Inspector and his PKW are far to the rear. I yodel back to him. We've come $1\frac{1}{2}$ km. along the Via Balbia, and are just about 6 km. west of the machine-gun emplacement. Nobody to be seen. We've come 4 km. nearer to the Gebel. The Tommies are running backwards and forwards up above. How easily they could cut off our retreat. I go still further forwards; it seems they're afraid we five will show fight. I put the glass down, and feel compelled to look to my right - and get an eyeful! Five English tanks are coming towards us.

"Everyone round here seems to have designs on our innocent little lives," I said. "The lorry we chased must have given the alarm to the tanks."

"Yes," said the Inspector. "This is war in Africa."

Before us we see the barbed wire entanglement. We signal to the Italians by way of recognition. Then three shots zoom through the air - run-bun-bun.

(The book closes, with the sergeant inside the perimeter, to the tune of salvos of British artillery fire.)

WAR OFFICE

The full text of the diary may be seen at Military Affairs, Room 33A, Ministry of Information.
